

This is Wentworth Films for Holocaust Museum, Sandra one with Ernest Weihs camera one on January 29, 1992. Take one.

And you can look at me. I want you to first tell me a little bit of your background as a Jewish child in Vienna and how you came to be baptized.

Oh, well, I was born in Vienna in November 1908. My father was Jewish, my mother was Jewish. My grandparents on both sides were Jewish. And 1914 I became-- I got a sister. My mother had another child. And when the war was breaking out--

[PHONE RINGING]

Uh-oh.

OK, start with how you were born in Vienna.

Yeah, I was born in Vienna in 1908. And my parents and both of my grandparents were Jewish. In 1914 I got a baby sister.

And we both lived with my mother, because my father had to go to war, World War One. When the war was over and he came back, on the way back somehow he met another woman, and he wanted a divorce. So my mother gave him a divorce, and both of us, my sister and myself, stayed with my mother till I was 11.

By that time my mother just couldn't make it raise both of us. So she made my father take me and his new wife to him. He was in another state of us there. And so she packed me a little suitcase and sent me off to him.

He in the meantime, he married that woman. She was Lutheran. When he married her he switched his religion to a Lutheran. And when I came there to live with them he made me take on Lutheran religion. And it was very good because there was a lot-- in that city where we lived there was a lot of anti-Semitism. And it was better to say I'm Lutheran than I was Jewish.

So anyway, I stayed with him from when I was 11 till I was 14. When I was 14, he tried to get me a job. And he was traveling all over Germany. He wanted me to become a nursery man. That means nothing children nursing, but nursery with greenhouses and cultivate flowers.

So when I was 14, he found me a job in Germany close to the city of Munich. And in the meantime, when I was there a half a year or so his company transferred him and his new wife, my stepmother, back to Vienna. And I had to learn this craft for three years. And I got a room and board and no pay.

Can you describe how different things were in 1938 when Hitler came? Can you describe the change in everyday life?

Well, when Hitler came everybody screamed Heil Hitler. Nobody wanted to be against it. And my real mother was living in Vienna too with my sisters in another part of Vienna.

She managed to marry a guy that was from Russia. The quota for Austrians to the United States was not open anymore. But becoming a citizen of Russia she was able with him and my daughter to go-- my sister to go to the United States.

Over here, they went each its own way. They divorced here right away. And my mother, my sister lived in New York. My sister got married there to a guy that also came from Vienna.

Back in Vienna how did people feel about the Jews at the beginning of the war?

Well, they were sometimes worse than the German were when Hitler came to power in Germany. And when they saw

the Jewish people getting picked up and there was certain schools where they collected them, they were standing on the streets just laughing at them and sneaking and very, very, very bad. It was very bad to be Jewish.

They had to wear a star. You couldn't work nowhere. And the people of Vienna at least 90% were for Hitler.

So my mother was going then in 1939 she went to the United States with my sister. I myself-- yeah, my father died in '37. So he didn't know anything about the whole thing. And I stayed with my stepmother for the time being.

And I had a job in a nursery in Vienna, which I could hold until the end of '38. Hitler came in March. The people I worked for never had any idea where I came from, that I was Jewish before. And they could-- they were swearing that I was Lutheran, so they kept me.

And the two sons of that guy that owned the nursery belonged to the Nazi party. And sooner or later, it came about that I'm from Jewish parents, and I have to go. So they had to let me go. And that was in the end of '38.

In the meantime, the [INAUDIBLE] command in Vienna, there is Israelites [INAUDIBLE] the place where all Israelites were registered, they had my birth certificate. And they were trying to get people to Palestine. But before it came to that, you had to go in a camp and learn how to work on a farm, do this and that, and milk the cows, and so on. I was-- except, they didn't know that I had another certificate that said I was Lutheran. So they--

Now we got to reload.

Roll two, take three.

They--

Now we got to reload.

Roll two, take three.

When you talked before with Linda you talked about-- you described an experience you had helping-- being with people when they packed to be transported.

Right yeah.

Can you tell me how it happened that you came to be doing that?

Yeah.

And how you felt about it, what you thought was happening?

I was in that camp, in the Jewish camp to learn farming. In the meantime, my stepmother in Vienna got a postcard. I was registered in a Swedish mission that was trying to get Jewish people out of Austria. And they are writing me that I should come to this-- it was a priest, a pastor, that was the director of the whole thing-- for an interview.

So I went back from that camp, from that farm, and came to Vienna and had that interview with that director. And he said that they are trying to get young people from Austria to Sweden. And he registered me, and found out what my profession was. And he said well, right now it's transport going, but we need somebody.

Outside of Vienna they had a home for the elderly Jewish people. And there was a huge garden and fruit trees and everything there. If I could go there and help out until the time comes that I could go on a transport, that would be a big help to them.

So I quit that farming, came back to Vienna, and went out to that home for the elderly. And I had made my room, my

board, and everything and I worked there. And the time went by, and I never got a sign that I am ready to go. I know they needed me, and they didn't want to let me go until the last minute.

In the meantime, the first woman that opened the gate in that big estate there was my future wife. She was working there too. They promised her the same thing, help us out there and we will try to get you out. Well, months went by and nothing happened. And the meantime, we became good friends and even engaged.

Then in the fall of '42 I think-- '41, the people of that little city where that home was insisted that that home has to be closed. They don't want any Jews living out there anymore. So this Swedish mission had a huge apartment building in Vienna where they had apartments for people that got kicked out of their apartments. And they had some-- it used to be like a huge place downstairs where they had beds for the sick ones. And they had a little chapel there.

And we had to close up out there in that home for the elderly. And we all moved in that apartment building. I worked there and my wife worked there-- I mean, just at that time we were not married yet. And we had a room to live there, two or three rooms, kitchen and two rooms.

And we stayed until the Austrian government wanted the Swedes to leave, go home. They had to close the whole thing and the Jewish-- the sick ones they got in hospitals, there was a Jewish hospital-- still there. And we rented a room in an apartment. There was a certain section in Vienna where Jews could still stay and live.

We were in that apartment there, and I got acquainted with a Dutch mission which were doing the same thing. Feeding people, taking them out of Austria, and so they were still working. And through them-- they worked with the SS to get them.

And in order to be able to stay they took some of us, we had to go out at night and pick up certain people for deportation. We had to put them some suitcase full of stuff, whatever they could carry, and the morning they were loaded up in trucks and taken to a place where they then would get transported to Poland. And that went on for a while until almost no Jews were left in Vienna. And that was '42.

Where did you think they were going in Poland?

They promised them labor camps. But then after awhile it-- the truth came through that they killed them there. And they buried them in mass graves.

I had an uncle, he lived with his wife in an apartment. And the SS men came and said I like that apartment, and I'm going to take it. And my uncle said you can have it, but I want to take my bathtub with me somehow-- I don't know how he came in that idea. He didn't want to move until he can get this thing. And a week later, he was gone to Poland, so we never saw them again.

And anyway, the time came when the Dutch people had to close too. And that was when I had to go and leave Vienna. My wife-- future wife stayed with her mother and father, because the mother was Catholic. She could-- she didn't have to go. And I left with a transport Vienna. I think it was October '42.

And they drove us with the boxcars to Theresienstadt, that was a former military camp for Austrian soldiers. And they made a ghetto out of this city, just like they did in Poland made those ghettos. And they had these huge buildings where men were living, other buildings where women were living.

We even had our own money and we had our own stores. And first of all, when we got there everything-- they took everything off, gave us these old clothes and our suitcase and our rings, everything was-- shoes, everything was confiscated. And--

Stop now, we have to put another roll of film.

Roll three, take four.

OK, why don't you pick up with describing Theresienstadt?

Yeah, so we were separated in different buildings, but we could see each other during the day. And we got fed in-- we have to get all to one place where we get our food. And it wasn't too bad. It was really like a ghetto. We had our own, so to speak, government.

But all was controlled by SS. So it's just we are all over the places. And I was lucky they gave you to certain working groups. And I was with a group of people that went out to the railroad station, unloaded the coal, unloaded the potatoes, or whatever it was, and bring it back into the ghetto, back and forth.

In the meantime, because we did this almost every day, we got acquainted with some of the Czechoslovakian railroad personnel. And they got letters for us out home. So we actually were corresponding with our people at home, telling them how it was and so on.

And my wife's father was still in Vienna. I was there '42, and in '43 he had to go too. My wife, my fiancÃ©, wanted to go with him and come and see me.

So she went with him on her own. She didn't have to, she could have stayed with her mother all the way through the war-- she came. I was standing there unloading coal and here comes that boxcar, and here she comes. Oh, I almost fainted.

So anyway, we were together for right about '42, '43-- she came in '43. And we even got married there. Not officially married, but like a ghetto marriage. And then in the beginning of '44 they said they need people to work in Germany in factories, and whoever wants to go out of the ghetto can go. So a bunch of us, my friends and me, we volunteered to go.

There was I don't know how many cars full of people. And instead we ended up in Auschwitz. And we came, it was my friend, his wife, his wife's little brother-- two brothers, little one and the older one, 17. We came at night, all the lights on.

We got us out of the cars, and here was the officer. You go this way, you got that way, you go this way, you go that way. All the-- most of the women and kids and young people had to be going that way. Whoever looked halfway decent to work went the other way.

And then we were-- but my wife was still in Theresienstadt. And the next day we look around, half of the people that came with us we didn't see. We knew they were gassed on the next day. All the women that looked elderly, all the kids that couldn't-- young to working age, we never saw them again.

Over there they stripped us again of everything we had and gave us these prison clothes. And we were in barracks. There's a bed here and a bed here all the way through and to sleep.

A couple of days later, all women came. And they told them in Theresienstadt your husbands are working in the factories in Germany. If you want to join them, you can. They all ran and registered and followed.

Couple of days later, we saw him through the fences. We couldn't talk, we could just wave-- saw that they are over here too. So we didn't know what was going on.

We, a group of us, we stayed only a little more than a week. We didn't get no stamps. We were sorted out, said you have to go to another labor camp where you can-- where we're going to put you to work.

So our group went to a place that was called Kaufering. It was a small labor camp next a railroad station between Munich and Kaufering. And there we were put in bunkers.

The roof is grass, and you go steps down. And here is a wooden boards where you sleep on. So from up high you

wouldn't probably not realize what's going on there. It looks like grass all over.

So we were there. And we didn't know where our wives were, where they got. But later on, we found out that they took them to another camp in Czechoslovakia. So we were in Poland, they were in Czechoslovakia. And we found that out after the war.

And so we stayed in the camp. We get our ration of bread and cabbage soup and whatever they feed us. And I was lucky again. I got to company, small group, they went out in the fields digging out the potatoes, bringing back the cabbage and all this stuff. And we had huge coats-- overcoats, long. And we had big inner inside sacks. We put potatoes here, potatoes here, and we marched in the camp.

And in each of these bunkers was a little stove. We heated that up at night and put the potatoes in the ashes. And I think that's what kept us alive beside the food we got. But others were not so lucky.

I came with people friends of mine. There's nobody in your group as strong and as tall and strong as this friend of mine were. And a week later I saw him as skeletons. They became diarrhea and they just ran out. And it was wintertime-- it was the winter from '44 of '45.

So what happened and they didn't last a week, two weeks. And it was so cold we had to bury them. They are only skeletons, only bones and skin laying there on the floor. And we recognized our friends, of course.

We had to put them in a two-wheeler, a big bunch of them. And carry them out in the fields with soldiers with us. And we had to dig this frozen ground deep enough so that we could bury them. Soon there was no more room. So we had to carry them to another camp and--